

tion is provided as a general guideline. Specific situations may vary and it is always recommended that you consult a tax advisor to address your questions and needs.

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See Spot ride

Accommodating service animals on buses

by Nishtha Mehta



Drivers sometimes encounter passengers traveling with service animals on their routes. These animals are more than just pets. They are a vital part of

same size as dogs). These animals guide visually-impaired and hearing-impaired individuals, provide seizure-alerts, and assist with mobility by fetching dropped items and pulling wheelchairs. They provide safety and comfort to their owner.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that service animals be permitted on board any vehicle open to the public. This brings us to the question of how a driver can recognize and best accommodate a service animal.

Service animal, or pet?

Making a decision to allow an unknown animal aboard a vehicle can be tricky. Drivers may find it difficult to tell the difference between service animals and pets. All transit agencies in Kansas, to remain in compliance with ADA, are required to allow service animal

It is important to understand that some passengers with service animals may have a largely undetectable disability. An example is epilepsy.

everyday life and are essential to their owners' independence. This article will provide information for drivers on how to recognize and accommodate service animals to provide the best possible service for their owners and the rest of your passengers.

A common misconception about service animals is that they are only "seeing eye dogs," but in fact service animals also include cats, monkeys, birds, pigs and even miniature horses (these are usually the

access to their public-use vehicles. The same rule does not apply to pets. Here are some ways the driver can determine whether the animal waiting to board is a service animal or a pet.

Some, but not all, service animals wear special collars and harnesses; however, no license or certification is required for these animals. To clarify any doubt about the role of the animal, the driver can simply

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ask the owner if the animal is a service animal. If the owner responds that it is a service animal, the driver can then inquire about the tasks the animal has been trained to perform. This will provide some information about the animal. No other questions regarding certification or the rider's disability can be asked.

It is important to understand that some passengers who have service animals may have largely undetectable disability, such as epilepsy.

Easter Seals Project ACTION has published a *Transit Operator's Pocket Guide* that provides drivers with information on how to assist and serve passengers traveling with service animals. It can be accessed for free at www.projectaction.org (click on Free Resources, then click on Order and Download Free Publication, and then select Transit Operator's Pocket Guide.)

In some cases, the rider could have multiple disabilities, for example, a passenger using a wheelchair could also have a visual impairment and the service animal accompanying the passenger may be a guide dog and a mobility-assistance dog.

If at first glance the animal does not seem to be a service animal, but on being asked the passenger claims it is, the driver should welcome the animal on board the vehicle.

While the driver has to allow a service animal access, some exceptions can be made. The animal has to be under the control of the handler or a designated caretaker at all times. If the animal threatens the safety of the driver or a passenger, access to the vehicle can be denied. This decision has to be made based on the behavior of that particular animal; it should not be based on past experiences with that particular breed or type of animal. Rest assured that

such a situation rarely occurs, as service animals are almost always well-trained and well-behaved.

Extending a helping hand

Once the driver has determined that a service animal will be boarding the vehicle, he or she can ask the owner or handler if any help is needed. Ed Eames, President of International Association of Assistance Dog Partners (IAADP), asserts that drivers have to be careful about asking the passenger before providing any assistance, as this gesture can be misinterpreted as taking power away

from the disabled person. If requested, the driver can inform the other passengers not to pet the animal.

Drivers can also assist passengers traveling with service animals in boarding or dismounting from the vehicle. According to Eames, a common situation is when a wheelchair lift is not wide enough to accommodate both the passenger and the animal. In such instances, the owner may ask the driver to take the leash. However, it is important to know that the service animal is working and should not be touched or given any command unless asked to do so by the passenger.

Service animals must be allowed to ride with their owners. The drivers cannot require passengers with service animals to sit in a specified area. Most assistance animals are trained to sit under the passenger's seat or at the handler's feet. This allows the aisle to be clear. Some

drivers—especially van and sedan operators—choose to carry a sheet or towel for the animals to sit on. This can also help contain dander or hair.

Making the right move

The ADA recognizes the important role service animals play in providing independence, safety, and a better quality of life to persons with disabilities. By mandating that service animals be allowed aboard public vehicles, the rights of persons with disabilities are protected. Allowing access to these animals is not only the lawful thing to do; it is also the right thing to do.

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